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ABSTRACT

A qualitative examination was made of the black newspaper, "The Blade" in Parsons, Kansas, during two six-week periods: September 24-October 29, 1892, the first available issues of the paper, appearing just prior to national elections; and October 23-November 27, 1897, which included two weeks before and four weeks after local elections. The intent was to explain the marked changes that occurred between the periods and evaluate the newspaper's possible influence on the course of local events by considering the experience of the black community in Parsons before and after the 1890s. The analysis revealed that the early "Blade's" inside editorial and local news pages protested oppression and projected to blacks an image of themselves as participating members of society. But its clippings endorsed the status quo of American society, which perceived individual blacks as threatening and ignored the existence of a black community. The 1897 "Blade" lacked a sufficiently developed national communications network that in a more systematic way could have offered evidence to show that the increasing black consciousness and the white reaction against it were not simply local phenomena. (HOD)

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Minorities and Communication Division

The Sharpening of The Blade, 1892-1897: A Black Newspaper and Black Consciousness

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The Sharpening of The Blade, 1892-1897:
A Black Newspaper and Black Consciousness

Historians generally link the rapid development of a mobilized national-circulation black press following World War I with the growth of a specific black consciousness and identity. Despite several setbacks, this relationship climaxed in the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. This study of a weekly black newspaper in Kansas at the turn of the century, suggests that this development began at the local level several decades earlier, when increasingly restrictive laws instituted after the end of Reconstruction began to drive blacks westward and northward. The evolution of **The Blade** in Parsons, Kansas, into a vital part of the black community there was similar to the path followed later by the Chicago **Defender**, the Pittsburgh **Courier**, and other such papers.

This study is a qualitative examination of **The Blade** during two six-week periods: September 24-October 29, 1892 (Vol. 1, Nos. 6-11), the first available issues of the paper, appearing just prior to national elections; and October 23-November 27, 1897 (Vol. 6, Nos. 13-18), which included two weeks before and four weeks after local elections. This article will advance explanations for the marked changes that occurred between the two periods and will evaluate **The Blade**'s possible influence on the course of local events by considering the experience of the black community in Parsons before and after the 1890s.

Although the study of the history of black journalism has advanced since John D. Stevens surveyed the field,[1] much remains to be done. There still is no thorough survey history. A basic introduction to the field can be obtained

from the work of Wolseley, Detweiler and Pride, as well as a special issue of **Journalism History**.[2] The work by Penelope Bullock on the history of 19th century black magazines fills an important gap.[3] W. Haywood Burns offers a useful essay on the black press and radicalism,[4] and Johnson & Johnson provide a solid examination of the debate between radicals and accomodationists at the beginning of the twentieth century, the period which follows that being investigated here.[5] A useful reference in this study is the volume by Moten on the black press in Kansas, one of the first monographs which looks at the black press in a particular state.[6]

The existence of a newspaper by and for blacks identifies a group distinct in more respects than skin color from readers of other newspapers. The degree to which the paper recognizes those differences and the manner in which it responds may vary. **The Blade**'s development will be considered with reference to two contrasting perceptions of the role of a black newspaper. Roland Wolseley concludes that enforced segregation in cities during Reconstruction spawned a community-conscious black press devoted to protesting discrimination and to reporting the minutiae of black life.[7] According to a history of Labette County, the Parsons **Eye-Opener**, a forerunner of **The Blade**, phrased its purpose somewhat differently, calling itself "an avenue by which to make known to the public [black] views, wants and intentions, and...a means of educating [black] young people in the duties of citizenship."[8]

Both of these approaches suggest that the black paper was to advance the interests of the black community. Both acknowledge that a news gap existed, that blacks were inadequately represented in the marketplace of ideas. But the papers sought to appeal to different readerships. The **Eye-Opener** phrased its primary purpose in terms of providing news -- albeit news of blacks -- to whites. It answered the necessarily internal (because of segregation) and

immediate news needs of the black community only insofar as it tried to help young blacks become responsible citizens of the community-at-large.

Wolseley's model is concerned with supplying news to the black community, with providing a forum for community issues, and with offering a black perspective on mainstream news. It also provides for the exchange of practical information on a regular basis. In Wolseley's newspaper, a black who is a responsible citizen fights against discrimination, and thus often seems to oppose the community-at-large.

The Community

Parsons, located in the southeastern part of Kansas, was founded in 1871 on a site visited the year before by the famed Horace Greeley.[9] It became an important stop on the Missouri, Kansas and Texas (M, K & T, or Katy) Railroad.[10] Blacks, called "exodusters," originally came to Kansas in 1879-1880 as part of a large migration from the South, primarily from Louisiana and Mississippi. An estimated 25,000 blacks came, disenchanted with Reconstruction and, in some cases, persuaded by vote-hungry Republicans or profit-hungry promoters who promised cheap land and equal opportunity for the price of the passage to John Brown's home state.[11] Already in 1880 there were 678 blacks in a Parsons population of 4256.[12] By the 1890s, there were about a thousand blacks and 8000 whites in Parsons, giving the town one of the largest black populations in southern Kansas.[13] They were institutionally segregated.[14]

In contrast to the majority of black immigrants, those in Parsons came mainly from Texas. Some of these were relatively well-off, although many were destitute.[15] Some bought homes and farms, but many lived in shacks in areas such as "Hogtown," where hogs were kept after being banned from the city limits.[16] The Parsons **Sun** carried sympathetic editorials about the plight of the blacks. The Kansas state government provided them some relief money

through the Kansas Freedman's Relief Association and some of the new residents received local assistance with housing, farming, jobs, food, schooling and health care. Some found work with a grain dealer, at a brickyard and in mines, although the railroad was the primary employer. Many could read and write. Already in 1880, about 100 black children attended school.[17] Hobson Normal, a black teacher-training institute founded by the Quakers, served the community from 1882 to 1896. There were also four black churches.[18] This was the community into which **The Blade** came.

The Blade: An Overview

Local weekly newspapers played an unusually substantial role in Kansas, whether for white, foreign-language, or black populations.[19] **The Blade**, published from 1892-1904, was already the third, and -- as it turned out -- the last black newspaper started in Parsons.[20] **The Kansas Advocate** existed for a few months in 1881. The **Eye-Opener** appeared in 1892, but folded soon after its business manager, E.W. Dorsey, left to become president of **The Parsons Weekly Blade.**[21] By September 30, 1893, Dorsey and his editor, Simeon O. Clayton, were claiming a circulation of 1200, made up of "hundreds of farmers, both colored and white" and "hundreds of laborers and businessmen." Dorsey and Clayton were proud of their accomplishments.

> [This is] the only publishing company exclusively owned and controlled by Negroes within a circuit of 500 miles around its location. The Blade Publishing Company owns and manages a publishing house located within a few doors of the corner around which the business center of Parsons lies, occupies the entire second floor of one of the principal buildings in town. It has its editorial room, job room, paper and storage room, type room and press rooms.[22]

The early **Blade**'s message was to cooperate and communicate with the local powers-that-be, presuming them benevolent and responsive. It implied that blacks would be treated equally if they showed themselves worthy of the honor, i.e. if they voted Republican, maintained law and order and obtained an educa-

tion. In these respects, it resembled **The Eye-Opener** model. The content of the later **Blade** was more rebellious. It ignored much mainstream news and sold its readers a defiantly black perspective. By assuming an activist stance and placing more emphasis on black community news, **The Blade** at the end of the five-year period closely matched Wolseley's model of the immediate post-Civil War black press. It aimed to be a catalyst for change.

The arrival in 1895 of E.W. Dorsey's son, J. Monroe, in the editorial office surely had much to do with the metamorphosis of **The Blade**, even though the paper had focused increasingly on discrimination starting in December 1893.23 The October 19, 1895 issue edited by the younger Dorsey offered evidence of his potentially more rebellious outlook.

> In assuming editorial management of the Blade I do so with reluctancy [sic]. The field surveyed by this newsbearer is a great one and one's thoughts are read by thousands -- many of whom are severe critics....
>
> In politics the Blade is republican but it is [cq] hidebound. It will stick to the party as long as the party sticks to it, but when the shutters are turned, then must each look out for No. 1....
>
> Finally I will say, all who want to see the Negro race advance in the uphill road of life and want a leader and guide, lend a helping hand to the Blade.

The statement shows Dorsey expected his new job to be difficult. But, as his niece, born in 1913, said recently, "He just went right ahead with whatever he started." Jean Cherry, a retired Internal Revenue Service employee and Kansas City resident, said E.W. Dorsey raised his children to be "progressive" and "aggressive."24

"From what my mother would tell me, my great grandfather [also] raised that family to get what they have coming to them...to be fighters more or less," Cherry said. The younger Dorsey's grandfather, Joe Chastain, was a white Virginia slaveowner. After Chastain had fathered slave children, "He

didn't desert them. He saw to it that they were well taken care of and educated," Cherry said.25

The Dorseys came to Parsons via Stonewall County, Texas, where Cherry said her "Uncle Mon" was born free. When the family moved to Parsons, the children attended Hobson Institute.26 The younger Dorsey's willingness as a **Blade** editor to rush in where his father in the early **Blade** had feared -- or at least declined -- to tread, may be attributable to his psychological and geographical distance from the experience of slavery. It is against this background that the remainder of this study will describe and evaluate the contents of **The Blade.**

The Contents

Graphics--In 1892, nothing on the front page clearly identified **The Blade** as a black newspaper. In contrast, the motto, "Protection to All. No Discrimination Against Color," on the 1897 masthead immediately identified **The Blade** as a black newspaper. The paper's design in 1892 was monotonous. Headlines and articles rarely were wider than one column. Illustrations were generally limited to national ads or an occasional back-page clipping, although the front page of the last issue examined boasted three lithographs. The 1897 **Blade** frequently ignored column divisions. The state seal on the masthead, along with what looks like an eagle's claw gripping a rolled-up flag on the editorial page, were standard in 1897 issues. Front-page ads included illustrations, and one or two cartoons often complemented front-page articles on the economy. A post-election crowing rooster (No. 15) was apparently the only original art during the two periods.

Advertisements--In addition to subscription and ad income, the 1897 **Blade** offers evidence of support from other sources. Ads comprised just under a third of the 1892 issues (nine columns), were evenly divided between national

and local, and never appeared on the front page. In 1897, ads increased to a little under one-half of the paper (13 columns), and occupied about one-third of the front page. In both years, many of the ads appeared regularly. In 1897, for example, the ad for "Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People" was featured in the upper left-hand corner of four of the six issues. Five of the six issues included a three-column announcement of the 1898 Trans-Mississippi International Exposition in Omaha.

Although local ads increased in number and variety, national ads increased from 50 to 60 percent of the total in 1897. Moten noted that national ads, usually for patent medicines and mail-order merchandise, paid more and were more reliable than local advertisers.[27] **The Blade** carried an "outstanding" number of classifieds compared to other black Kansas papers of the period.[28]

Only in 1897 were any ads specifically directed to black consumers: a mail-order book, **The Philosophy of Negro Suffrage**; "Wonderful Discovery -- Curly Hair Made Straight By Ozonized Ox Marrow;" and the Afro-American Mutual Benefit Association (AAMBA) -- "No one who is eligible can be barred" (No. 13).

The Blade was the local contact for two of its advertisers, a patent company and the AAMBA. For the latter it had no scruples about promoting insurance policies in hard news articles: Nos. 13, 17 and 18 ran stories of local homes destroyed or nearly destroyed by fire. The owners, the paper noted, were inadequately insured.

Each issue ran several ads in **The Blade**'s own name. It advertised "Commissions to agents," job printing, and "Book printing a specialty."

> You must not think because this is a Printing Company of Colored men, that they are not prepared, nor qualified to do your work, for we have a Complete Job Office, that is, as much material as we need to do most any job you need.
>
> Give us a trial.29

In fact, the job printing "contributed to" the paper's financial success.30 One-eighth and one-fourth page ads offered **The Blade** and **The Semi-Weekly Capital** of Topeka, Kansas for two dollars a year, or **The Blade** and a crayon portrait for $2.48. **The Blade**'s notice that it was hiring "an extra force of three" (No. 17) soon after it announced that associate editor H. Lewis Dorsey was leaving to start a new **Blade** in Atchison, Kansas (No. 15) gives some idea of the scale of the operation.

National vs. local black news--The prominence, depth and amount of black community news increased over the five years at the expense of clippings, that is, material reprinted from other publications. Only one of the clippings that filled the front and back pages of the 1892 **Blade** originated in Parsons:

> H.H. Brown, a citizen of Parsons, heard someone cutting at his screer door the other night, and fired through the door with his pistol. Soon after a dead negro, by the name of Claggett, was found a short distance from Brown's house (no. 6).

Random two-to-four line briefs called "The World at Large" filled almost half the front page in four of the issues in 1892. Strikes, scandals, epidemics and Odd Fellows elections jostled regional industry, political and agricultural reports. Other front-page features in 1892 included: a Union Army veterans' parade in Washington, D.C., celebrating the 27th anniversary of the end of the Civil War; a public letter from the People's Party candidates for president and vice-president; and President Benjamin Harrison's wife's lingering illness and death. Of 18 front-page clippings mentioning blacks, half were in the terse World-at-Large category, such as, "Colored people of both sexes will be admitted to the Chicago university" (No. 7), or "Four negroes were hanged by a mob at Monroeville, Ala., for the brutal murder of Richard L.

Johnson and his daughter" (No. 10). The remaining nine articles portrayed blacks as murderers, rapists ("Hugh Henry, a negro, attempted criminally to assault Miss Mabel Welsh at Larned the other night....At night a mob took him from jail and hanged him to a telephone pole." [No. 6]), burglars, being poisoned by a tarantula, fighting, celebrating the Emancipation Proclamation, holding up a streetcar, being killed, or dissatisfied ("Race Troubles Likely/Mixed Schools Wanted by Negroes and Violence Feared" [No. 8]). A modern-day reader has the impression that readers of these articles must have concluded that blacks often threatened the law and order of society and rarely contributed to it.

Blacks on the local page -- page three -- were Baptists, barbers, students, voters, "gentlemenly janitors," lawyers, poets, travelers, engaged, in business and sometimes in trouble. They suffered rheumatism, laid "beautiful and substantial side walks" before their houses, and attended concerts, fairs, weddings, squirreling parties ("We succeeded in capturing two 'possums and six barrels of fun." [No. 8]), political rallies, teachers' meetings, sermons and socials.

By 1897, "The World at Large" had disappeared. Clippings filled two columns on page one and most of page three. President William McKinley and the developing Cuban crisis were barely mentioned. Only one clipping mentioned blacks, in a neutral context, on an inside page (No. 14, reprinted in No. 15). The practice of reprinting the two page one columns of clippings on page three in subsequent issues suggests that they were viewed as filler when there was not enough new news. The front page featured regular reports from correspondents in communities as much as 100 miles away. In five of the six issues, "Winfield Items," "Joplin Inklings," "Coffeyville Notes," "Chetopa News," and "Pleasanton Clippings" filled at least two front-page columns and

often continued onto other pages. Th sixth issue also featured local black news, the "Proceedings of the Ministers and Deacons Union of the Southeastern Dist ict Held at Cherokee" (No. 16).

In the first issue after the 1897 election (No. 15), which featured a three-column headline, "The Blade Triumphant/In Tuesday's Election the Colored Republicans Rebuked the Party Ringsters for Their Perfidy in the Past Elections", local news even displaced the ads that appeared regularly on the front page. Below the headline was a square 3-column wide drawing of a crowing rooster, under which an essay protested discrimination. Other front-page items included an offer of a free mail-order veterinary catalogue, a train schedule, and a remedy for bedbugs.

In 1897, "Local and Personal News" of Parsons appeared on the back page. Typically it included the sick list, nutting expeditions, and interesting sermons, but business dealings and career advancement attracted more notice than in 1892, e.g. "J.W. French and William Davis have the contract for the plaster work on the building for the Home of the Friendless" (No. 14). One article applauded "A prosperous Negro," whose wagons were hauling pipes for the new gas mains (No. 14). Another commended the trustworthiness of the treasurer of the Women's Mission circle: "It is policy to have such people as she has proven to be to hold the finance of any institution" (No. 16). Reports on white businesses included gross earnings of the Katy Railroad (No. 15) and the construction of a new ice plant and reorganization of an old one (No. 18). More, and more detailed, accounts of arrests and trials often indicated skin color:

> A young white man...was killed Thursday night out at the Whittaker brickyard in a free-for-all melee....Several of the crowd are under arrest (No. 16).

> Rev. Perry Davis of Chanute arrived in the city on last Sat. for the purpose of soliciting means with which to prosecute the murder of William Berry, who was so brutally slain in Chanute about four weeks ago (No. 17).

Additional community service information included listings of "Secret Societies" and a "Church Directory" on page four.

Cooperation vs. alienation--In 1892, **The Blade** viewed blacks as an integral part of the white community and the Republican Party. By 1897, it accused both of betraying black interests, and it recommended reprisals. Its advice in 1892, printed below the Republican ticket, was "Let every Negro vote for the interest of his race, and to do this he will undoubtedly have to vote the Republican ticket straight" (No. 6). Beyond party affiliation, there was little information about candidates or other individuals: "Corbett is a Republican and J.L. Sullivan is a Negro-hating Democrat" (No. 6). By 1897, **The Blade** had become disillusioned:

> If the white Republicans of Parsons and Labette county don't like the policy of **The Blade** as they see it now, just let a few more of [sic] than a dozen of them drop a collection in the missionary box and take **The Blade** for a year and we'll guarantee them their money's worth of good Republican doctrine. Try it gentlemen (No. 13).

The pre-election issue put these words in the mouth of a local Republican politician: "What the h--- do we want to spend money on the niggers for? They're all going to vote for the Republican ticket anyway" (No. 14). The paper's conclusion was bitter:

> The time was when the Negroes of the United States could put implicit faith in the word of a Republican...but in these days...it is just as impossible...as it is to trust a sheep-killing dog in a flock of sheep (No. 14).

After the election, the paper took credit for delivering the black vote to the People's Party: "The colored Republicans of Parsons fed their white friends on green persimmon pie last Tuesday. What ugly looks!" (No. 15). The paper also endorsed black candidates for future elections.

White politicians, businessmen and editors were accused, often by name, of corruption, e.g. "Rattlesnake Pete Foley managed to filch hundreds of dollars from the county treasury" (No. 13). **The Blade** reported smugly that "Republican ringsters attempted to coerce the colored voters of this city by threatening to shut them out of work...but it didn't work" (No. 15). Continued black support for Republicans in the nearby town of Oswego was "an attempt to imitate the Negro of 35 years ago when he knew nothing but his master's command" (No. 16).

In 1892, protests against oppression, lynching and segregated schools were on inside pages and were general in nature, e.g. "The Caucasian, the Indian, the Chinaman and all others have united their strength against the Negro....He must fight his way all alone and unaided" (No. 7). They were tempered by reports of progress in religion, education and personal wealth, by patriotic sentiment and faith in local government, and by humility. Two articles responding to the shooting of the alleged black burglar (see page 8 above) indicated faith in local government. "Worse and Worse" demanded "more night police to protect our citizens and property from the outrages of these prowling demons" (No. 6). "An Untrue Report" denied the Parsons black community sought to have a white councilman arrested for the murder. "We believe, however, that a stronger police force would be more creditable to our city and its inhabitants," the paper noted. "What we want is more official protection" (No. 6).

The Blade promoted Hobson Normal Institute as the "best educational institution in the state, tuition free and conducted by Christian instructors. Do not fail to grasp these golden opportunities" (No. 6). This bastion of local black pride was dependent on white support. Threatened with the closing of the school, **The Blade**, in a page two editorial, appealed to its white readership to keep the school open, noting, "The black man is the slave of

ignorance, passion, vice and sin and needs the freedom which education in intelligence, morals, and the knowledge of Christ gives" (No. 9). A two-and-one-half column sermon by Reverend A. Fairfax, one of Parsons' prominent black citizens, reflected **The Blade**'s confidence that justice and freedom were imminent: "The great day of battle and judgment is at hand....So love has conquered by meeting all the demands of justice and the prey is taken from the mighty and the lawful captive delivered" (No. 10).

After Hobson was closed in 1896 and the paper had a new editor and motto, faith and humility gave way to cynicism and impatience. A two-part essay, "The Question of the Hour," by S.C. Coleman, ruled out black failures as an excuse for discrimination:

> For years, [the white people] have...told the Negroes that when they acquired education, wealth, intelligence and property that he [sic] would be respected by the white man. Now, is this true? I say no....Negroes are being lynched throughout this country every day without the very slightest attempt of proof of guilt....Not one in twenty charges of rape by Negroes is true.... (Nos. 15-16)

"The time has come when the Negro must look out for himself or go amiss..." (No. 18), **The Blade** claimed. It also advocated black unity, noting that "ex-slave pension agitation will amount only to talk as long as the Negroes of America stand so far apart; and all forces must first blend into UNITY...." (No. 13).

Whereas black readers in Parsons in 1892 were encouraged to patronize West Parsons businesses and **Blade** advertisers ("He likes to see you socially. Friendship makes patronage" [No. 8]), 1897 issues cited specific stores for rudeness and called for boycotts, complaining, "Some colored people are still making fools of themselves by patronizing merchants who neither ask for nor appreciate their trade" (No. 13). It advised, "Let all of our people be men and resent every insult" (No. 13). Readers were also advised to contribute to legal prosecution or defense funds for wronged blacks.

Instead of American presidents (Nos. 6, 8), **The Blade** in 1897 eulogized heroes of the black cause, such as pre-Civil War abolitionist editor Elijah Lovejoy (No. 16) and black statesman John M. Langston, who "...illustrates the possibilities of an aspiring, energetic youth, though he be in thraldom [sic] born....He never soared so high that he could not see the condition of his race" (No. 17).

Pocketknife vs. sword--Whereas the earlier **Blade**'s appeal was modest and altruistic, the later **Blade** made a strong pitch to the black consumer. The 1892 **Blade** reported staff trips, office callers ("Reverend F. Durdin and Brother James Griffin were pleasant callers at **The Blade** office Saturday. Rev. Durdin is quite favorably impressed with our little paper and says he will do all in his power for its promotion" [No. 9]) and benefit concerts in its honor, but did not directly advertise itself. In 1897, in contrast, the paper promoted itself aggressively, established five area correspondents, carried more ads and had revamped its layout. As "The Blade Triumphant" after the election, it took credit for controlling the black vote (No. 15). The first post-election issue had noted how the last pre-election issue "was read by more people than any other issue of the paper since it was founded in '92." Forty years later, Moten told a different and sadder story:

> After five years the **Blade** turned to the Peoples Party because the Republicans had refused to place a Negro on the State or County ticket. The Peoples Party was overwhelmingly defeated and [the] paper suffered extreme loss of prestige and patronage. A number of advertisers withdrew their ads and the **Blade** was sold at a sherrifs [sic] sale a year later. J.L. Craw and C.L. Morris attempted to revive the paper, but it constantly declined until it finally suspended publication December 27, 1904. No other colored paper has since been established in Southern Kansas.[31]

Whatever the final outcome, accolades to Dorsey's sharp tongue and political acumen were reprinted from **The Statesman** of Denver (No. 16) and the **Pioneer Press** of Martinsburgh, West Virginia (No. 17). Promotional slogans were

scattered across each page, such as "If you see it in The Blade then you know it's so," or "Who says The Blade ain't in it?"

In 1897, even a new subscriber was news: "Mr. Nathan Ford has become an admirer of The Blade and it will be a visitor at his home hereafter" (No. 17). Subscription prices were raised 20 percent in 1897 from $1.25/year to $1.50, and **The Blade** began to pressure subscribers to renew and pay up, noting, "...a mark across this place indicates that your subscription has expired and requests you to renew it at once or state your reason why." It was followed by an adapted Bible verse:

> To Our Debtors Who Are True Christians we recommend your careful and prayerful consideration of the following selections of scripture:..."The wicked buyeth and payeth not, but the righteous show mercy and payeth" (Psalms 37:21).[32]

A schedule was printed for door-to-door collecting for overdue subscriptions in certain areas.

Discussion

The early **Blade** tried to cut two ways at once. Its inside editorial and local news pages protested oppression and projected to blacks an image of themselves as participating members of society. But its more visible half -- the clippings -- endorsed the status quo of American society, which perceived individual blacks as threatening and ignored the existence of a black community.

Sources of income and the change in management should be considered in accounting for the new policies and look of **The Blade** in 1897. In 1892, the paper may have been financially dependent on whites, which could account for its perspective on race relations at that time. Such dependence could have occurred in at least two ways. Many of the 1200 black newspapers started in the United States between 1866 and 1905 depended on a white circulation because black discretional spending alone was insufficient to support them.[33]

The **Blade**'s apparent difficulty collecting from subscribers in 1897 suggests that many indeed could not afford the newspaper. The Republican party provided another possible source of income for black newspapers in Kansas in the 1890s. Since most blacks were Republican from the Civil War until the New Deal in the 1930s, that party mobilized the black vote in election years by funding newspapers.[34] No concrete evidence that **The Blade** was one of these has been found, but the newspaper was founded in an election year and gave the Republican ticket a blanket endorsement. With "one of the largest Negro populations of Southern Kansas,"[35] Parsons presumably had a vote worth winning.

It is unlikely that the 1897 **Blade** had either of these sources of support. By its own count (No. 13), it had only a dozen white subscribers, and it supported the People's Party. Aggressive advertising, appeal to a broader circulation as indicated by added correspondents, and evidence of subsidiary ventures (the job shop, and insurance and patent sales commissions) are characteristic of a capitalistic enterprise dependent on its own marketing. Moten attributed **The Blade**'s success to its job shop and to the relative wealth and numbers of Parsons blacks.[36]

Monroe Dorsey's entrepreneurial instincts may have been superior to his father's, but they were not good enough to sell his radical politics. Apparently finding Parsons barren ground for the seeds of civil disobedience, Dorsey moved to Washington, D.C. sometime before 1920. In 1924, he wrote to his sister, "Since I'm in Washington and have started in the printing business on my own, I expect to stay here." He died in Washington in 1939. "The only reason he left was because he wanted to make a little more progress than he could in Parsons," Cherry said. "Parsons was such a small town."[37]

The background of the blacks who lived in Parsons may give some insight

to their reception of the **Blade**. Blacks were latecomers to Parsons, having arrived no more than 13 years before the paper started. As already noted,[38] many received local charity in the form of housing, work, clothing, food, health care and schooling, and not surprisingly, some may have been hesitant to accuse benefactors of discrimination.

In Beatrice Holland's childhood during the 1910s and 1920s, adults considered Parsons an improvement over Texas and Oklahoma. "There was discrimination in Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas, too," she said, "but it was worse [in Texas and Oklahoma]." Many of those newly-arrived felt lucky to be hired by the railroad. "If you had a job working for the Katy, you had a good job," she said.[39] This recent rise in fortunes probably weakened Dorsey's call to arms, especially since the newspaper may have increased tension between the races, at least for a while. Leola Estes, born in 1895, attended elementary school with Monroe Dorsey's two daughters, but has no memory of the **Blade**. She remembers a happy childhood in Parsons, free of racial tension. "If there were disturbances amongst the races, our parents would not talk about it in front of us," she said. "We had plenty of food, plenty of clothes, plenty of everything."[40] Cherry said that after her uncle left town, his sister (her mother) was alone in actively protesting discrimination, suing a theater in 1934 that would allow her to sit only in the Jim Crow section. The theater owner died before the case could be decided. But for most black residents, she said, discrimination was "the accepted way of life. So very many of them were afraid to [protest]. And they not only were afraid, they thought it wouldn't do any [illegible]."[41]

The **Blade** might have mustered more support for boycotts and independent voting if the blacks of Parsons had had the perception of being part of a regional movement. But although the **Blade** itself established a network of subscribers and correspondents in different communities, there was no network

of black newspapers in those towns. In fact, the **Blade** identified itself as the only exclusively black-owned and operated publishing company "within a circuit of 500 miles around its location."[42] Dorsey's castigation of the blacks of Oswego, Kansas, as imitating the slaves of 35 years earlier for continuing to vote Republican suggests his was a voice in the wilderness.[43]

Another factor diminishing the likelihood of organized protest was that during Dorsey's time, Parsons lacked the kind of shocking racial violence that activated the civil rights movement in other parts of the country. As Williams reports, this flaring up of racial violence after the turn of the century helped speed up black cooperation in Oklahoma. In response, the Oklahoma Negro Press Association was organized in 1906. As Williams notes,

> The black newspapers did such a thorough job of mobilizing the black vote into a Republican voting bloc that even in several of the larger urban areas...the Republican Party was dependent on blacks and was forced to concede blacks a place on the party's ticket.[44]

It is impossible, of course, to know whether Dorsey could have garnered more support in 1892 when the alleged black burglar was killed, or around 1907 when, as an 85-year-old Parsons resident recalled nearly 8 decades later, "They almost had a riot here." Monroe Lowe said the black community was outraged when a policeman beat up a black man. "He was arrested unlawfully, the way I understood it," he said. No riot or demonstration occurred.[45]

Conclusion

Today **the Parsons Weekly Blade** is almost unknown among blacks and journalists in Parsons. The Labette County Historical Society does not possess a single copy for display in the county museum.[46] Beatrice Holland, now 74, says her earliest recollection of Parsons blacks employed by a newspaper is paper boys who delivered the **Chicago Defender** and the **Kansas City Call** in the

1920s. As to whether any worked for the local **Parsons Sun**, she replied, "If they did, they were cleaning up the office."47

Separate grade schools (until 1956), swimming pools, parks, churches, cemetery sections and theater seating (blacks sat upstairs in the "buzzards' roost") are part of Parsons' history of segregation.48 A long-time Parsons journalist said the local newspaper's coverage of the black community "was mostly bad -- arrests, shootings, cuttings [stabbings] and so forth."49 But there were also signs of tolerance and of success within the black community. Parsons had a black policeman and an integrated high school not long after 1900, and blacks ran a hospital, funeral home, grocery and other businesses.50

Several of the most senior black citizens of Parsons have no recollection of organized protests, such as boycotts, before Martin Luther King, Jr.'s influence in the late 1950s and 1960s. Monroe Lowe and nonagenarian Leola Estes say they stayed out of politics. "I didn't vote then and I don't now," Lowe said. Estes, a school teacher from 1918 to 1929, said she first knew of the **Call** and the **Defender** around 1910, but never read newspapers. Nor did Lowe: "They run off at the mouth and just keep you upset," he said.51

The 1892 **Blade** was probably more in step with blacks of Parsons than it was in 1897. The 1897 **Blade**, run by the younger Dorsey and an isolated vanguard of the civil rights movement, failed because there was not yet the social development and the communications network to support it. A local paper, no matter how radical, may simply have been unable to have significant editorial impact on a local population. The more radical attitude espoused by the young Dorsey would have required an alternative financial base to replace the political, advertiser and possibly white support it had had earlier. More apparently, the 1897 **Blade** lacked a sufficiently developed national communications network that in a more systematic way could have offered evidence to show that the increasing black consciousness and the white reaction against it

was not simply a local phenomenon. The rapid growth of national black journalism after World War I filled that gap. But the earlier evolution of papers such as **The Blade** helped make that possible.

Footnotes

[1]John D. Stevens, "Black Journalism: Neglected No Longer," in Ronald T. Farrar & Stevens, ed., **Mass Media and the National Experience**, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 97-111.

[2]Roland Wolseley, **The Black Press, U.S.A.** (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1971); Frederick G. Detweiler, **The Negro Press in the U.S.** (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1922); Armistead Pride, "A Register and History of Negro Newspapers in the United States 1827-1950," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern, 1950; Armistead Pride, "Negro Newspapers: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," **Journalism Quarterly** 28 (Spring 1951), pp. 179-88. Also useful is George W. Gore, Jr., **Negro Journalism: An Essay on the History and Present Conditions of the Negro Press** (Greencastle, Indiana: DePauw University, 1922). This thin volume was an expansion of a term paper written by a DePauw junior.

[3]Penelope Bullock, **The Afro-American Periodical Press, 1838-1909** (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

[4]W. Haywood Burns, **The Voices of Negro Protest in America** (London: Oxford University Press, 1963).

[5]Abby Arthur Johnson & Ronald M. Johnson, "Away from Accomodation: Radical Editors & Protest Journalism, 1900-1910," **Journal of Negro History** 62 (November 1979), pp. 325-38.

[6]Rashey B. Moten, Jr., "The Negro Press of Kansas," Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Kansas, 1938. More recent state surveys include Charles W. Grose, "Black Newspapers in Texas, 1868-1970," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, 1972; and Henry L. Suggs, ed., **The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979** (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983), which offers a state-by-state survey.

[7]Wolseley, p. 27

[8]Nelson Case, **History of Labette County, Kansas: From the First Settlement to the Close of 1892** (Topeka: Crane & Co., 1893), p. 292.

[9]Robert G. Athearn, **In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas 1879-80** (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), p. 186.

[10]See Vincent V. Masterson, **The Katy Railroad and the Last Frontier** (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952).

[11]Moten, pp. 6-7; and Athearn, pp. 186-93. Another useful source on the migration is Nell I. Painter, **Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977).

[12]Moten, pp. 6-7.

[13]**The Parsons Weekly Blade**, October 15, 1892; and Moten, p. 74.

[14]**The Blade**, October 15, 1892.

[15]Athearn, pp. 186-93.

[16]interviews with Beatrice Holland and Warren H. Morton, Jr., Parsons residents, August 13, 1984.

[17]Athearn, pp. 186-93.

[18]**The Blade**, October 15, 1892; and Case, op. cit.

[19]Eleanor L. Turk, "The German Newspapers of Kansas," **Kansas History** 6:1 (Spring 1983), p. 46.

[20]Case, p. 292; and Moten, p. 75.

[21]Case, p. 292.

[22]**The Blade**, December 23, 1893. A circulation of 1200 is also given to **The Blade** in 1897-See **N.W. Ayer & Son's American Newspaper Annual** (Philadelphia: N.W. Ayer & Son, 1897)

[23]Jean Cherry, telephone conversations, December 1984 and March 1985. During the two years preceding the younger Dorsey's first issue, no names of the staff were published except for one three-month period, when his brother Lewis was listed as editor. It is possible the two brothers were jousting for the soul of the paper, although there is no evidence to substantiate this other than the departure of Lewis from Parsons soon after his brother became editor.

[24]Cherry conversations.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Moten, p. 44.

[28]Ibid., p. 43.

[29]**The Blade**, September 30, 1893.

[30]Moten, p. 75. No information as to how the printing press was acquired or what became of it was found.

[31]Ibid.

[32]In the King James version, the verse reads: "The wicked borroweth and payeth not again: but the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth."

[33]Henry G. Labrie, "A Profile of the Black Newspaper," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1973, p. 30.

[34]Moten, pp. 16-17.

[35]Ibid., p. 74.

[36]Ibid., pp. 74-5.

[37]Cherry conversations; Dorsey's letter, written July 14, 1924 to Aritha Clayton, Cherry's mother, is in Cherry's possession.

[38]Athearn, pp. 186-93.

[39]Holland interview.

[40]Interviews with Parsons resident Leola Estes, August 1984 and March 1985.

[41]Cherry conversations.

[42]**The Blade**, December 23, 1893.

[43]Ibid, November 13, 1897.

[44]Nudie Williams, "The Black Press in Oklahoma," **The Chronicles of Oklahoma** 61:3 (Fall 1983), p. 317.

[45]Interview with Parsons resident Monroe Lowe, August 13, 1984.

[46]Interviews with Martin Thomas and other Parsons residents, August 13, 1984.

[47]Holland interview.

[48]Holland and Morton interviews.

[49]Thomas interview. Thomas spent 50 years with the **Sun**, starting out in 1932 as stockyards reporter.

[50]Holland and Morton interviews.

[51]Interviews with Parsons residents.